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The Eclipsed Imagination in Shelley's "The Triumph of Life"

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Shelley's "The Triumph of Life" explores the consequences befalling the mind's perception of reality when the light of imagination is eclipsed or displaced by another intellectual light as the principal mode of knowledge. But the apparent failure of imagination is not depicted as necessary or final in "The Triumph." Contrary to some recent readings, the poem does not reveal "the latent negativity of the imagination."[1] Nor does the poem reflect Shelley's "loss of faith in the world of imagination"; it is not the "recantation" of a "poet who has rejected poetry," nor is it a "suicidal" poem.[2] Rather, "The Triumph" reiterates one of the central ideas in *A Defence of Poetry:* the imperative need for imagination as a guiding force against the excessive dominance of reason, termed in the *Defence* "the owl-winged faculty of calculation."[3] Without imagination man is enslaved to a phenomenal or empirical view of reality, a problem Shelley thought particularly acute when he

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[1]David Quint, "Representation and Ideology in *The Triumph of Life*," *SEL* 18 (Autumn 1978):650. Quint argues that the "deformation of the imaginative experience into ideology is both the subject and the intrinsic poetic process of *The Triumph of Life*" (p. 639). Although I agree the poem deals with the deformation of imaginative experience, I disagree with the assertion that imagination, acting as an instrument of selfhood, deforms its own representations. For Shelley, the imagination is an instrument of love, opposed in function to selfhood.

[2]Ross Woodman, *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1964), pp. 191 and 194. See also James Rieger, *The Mutiny Within* (New York: George Braziller, 1967). Arguing that "all aesthetic questions raised by the poem serve the larger one of how, or whether, to live" (p. 218), Rieger reads "The Triumph" as a series of renunciations, culminating in a renunciation of life itself, for which he presents evidence supporting Shelley's death as an act of suicide-murder (pp. 221-35). For a convincing refutation of Rieger's evidence, see Kenneth Neill Cameron, *Shelley: The Golden Years* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 98-111.

[3]*Shelley's Prose, or The Trumpet of a Prophecy,* ed. David Lee Clark (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1954), p. 294. All quotations from Shelley's essays and prefaces are from this edition and will hereafter be cited in the text as *Prose.*

wrote the *Defence:* "The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world has for want of the poetical faculty proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave" (*Prose,* p. 293). "The Triumph" depicts the intellectual enslavement resulting when the primacy of imagination is displaced in the mind by the interposition of an intellectual power that eclipses and usurps imagination's light. The consequence, as two recent critics have argued, is a type of purgatorial living death.[4] Yet such a state is neither inevitable nor inescapable. "The Triumph" implicitly points toward the means of reviving imaginative vision, for its apparent failure reflects, according to Shelley, man's prior embrace of selfhood, an act negating imagination's power. Consequently, the only light left to guide the mind is reason, without imagination a cold and loveless power, its knowledge limited to the empirical. Restoration of imagination demands redirection of man's will, rejection of selfhood in favor of love, defined in the *Defence* as "a going out of our own nature and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own" (*Prose,* pp. 282-83). That essential point is made explicit in "The Triumph" through Rousseau's narrative, for it serves as an object lesson to the poem's speaker of one who in life did not make the necessary commitment of will.

I

The sunrise opening "The Triumph" is generally recognized as auspicious in Shelley's poetry, and it introduces the imagination theme:

> Swift as a Spirit hastening to his task
> Of glory & of good, the Sun sprang forth
> Rejoicing in his splendour, & the mask
> Of darkness fell from the awakened Earth.[5]
>
> (1-4)

As in *Prometheus Unbound,* the movement here is from night to day, from darkness to illumination, representing a crucial awakening. The effect of the sunrise is identical to that in *Prometheus* where Asia states

[4]Charles E. Robinson, *Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 221-30; and Quint, p. 642.

[5]My text of "The Triumph" is from the variorum edition by Donald H. Reiman, *Shelley's "The Triumph of Life": A Critical Study* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1965). All other quotations from Shelley's poetry are from *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* ed. Thomas Hutchinson, 2nd edn., corrected by G.M. Matthews (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970).

"Prometheus shall arise / Henceforth the sun of this rejoicing world" (II.iv.126-27). The rise of the Promethean sun parts "the veil, by those who were, called life" — an act of which the Spirit of the Hour says: "The loathsome mask has fallen" (III.iv.190;193), revealing a world pervaded by love made visible by the Promethean sun. The sunrise that opens "The Triumph" likewise removes "the mask of darkness" as all elements in nature "Rise as the Sun their father rose" (18) in response to that joyous event.

The positive effect of the sun's initial appearance in "The Triumph" is incompatible with Harold Bloom's suggestion that it represents a Wordsworthian fading of visionary power into "the light of common day."[6] In function, the sun symbolizes imagination which "strips the veil of familiarity from the world and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty" (*Prose,* p. 295). That identification gains plausibility in light of Shelley's use of the sun as symbol of imagination, particularly in his later writing. In *Prometheus Unbound* the sun assumes that symbolic connotation through its association with Prometheus, generally interpreted as personifying the imaginative power in man.[7] Explicit use of the sun as symbol of imagination occurs in a verse fragment appearing just prior to the draft of a lyric passage intended for *Prometheus* (III.iii.94-95) in the Bixby-Huntington notebook:

> Hold — divine image
> Eclipsed Sun — Planet without a beam
> Wilt thou offend the Sun thou emblemest
> By blotting out the light of written thought?[8]

Eclipse of the sun by the moon symbolizes eclipse of the imagination, the "divine image" in man expressed through "written thought" or poetry. Because the moon, the "Planet without a beam," should rightly receive its light from the sun, serving thereby as a reflected emblem of the

[6]Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking* (1959; rpt. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1969), p. 270. Bloom's suggestion is central to his reading of the poem which understands the sun as an ambiguous, potentially negative symbol (pp. 224-25).

[7]Among those who read Prometheus as personifying imagination are John Todhunter, *A Study of Shelley* (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1880), p. 136; Frank Lea, *Shelley and the Romantic Revolution* (London: Routlege, 1945), p. 112; and most recently Cameron, *Shelley: The Golden Years,* p. 496. Cameron identifies Prometheus as "the poet," which implicitly emphasizes the element of imagination, for Shelley asserts in the *Defence* that poets "in the highest universal sense of the word" are those in whom the power of imagination is most intensely active.

[8]Bixby-Huntington Notebook II, 25^{r}, cited in Neville Rogers, *Shelley at Work: A Critical Study,* 2nd edn. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 218.

"divine image," its interposition before the sun is offensive because it blots out the "divine image." Instead of reflecting the sun, the moon negates its light. Such an eclipse violates the moon's function as emblemizer of the sun as the lesser, inherently cold light imposes itself before the greater, warming light.

The terms of the potential sun/moon opposition become more explicit in the draft of a letter to Charles Ollier, written in early 1821 as Shelley's initial response to Thomas Love Peacock's *The Four Ages of Poetry*. Shelley writes that Peacock "would extinguish Imagination, which is the Sun of Life, and grope his way by the cold and uncertain and borrowed light of the Moon which he calls Reason, — stumbling over the interlunar chasm of time where she desserts us, and [like] an owl, rather than an eagle, stare with dazzled eyes on the watery orb which is the Queen of his pale Heaven."[9] Here, little more than a year before beginning "The Triumph of Life," Shelley unequivocally associates the sun with imagination and the moon with reason. In both the notebook fragment and the Ollier letter, the moon is depicted negatively because it has assumed an improper primacy in relation to the sun. These two passages indicate Shelley's concern that the light of imagination could be obscured or displaced by reason, even temporarily. That is precisely what happens in *Epipsychidion,* composed just prior to the Ollier letter. There the Moon, which "warms not but illumines" (285), appears "like a noonday dawn" (276), temporarily deluding the unwary speaker until the "Incarnation of the Sun" (335) appears, dispelling the delusion. If in *Epipsychidion,* as in the Ollier letter, the sun symbolizes imagination and the moon reason, then the potential deluding power of moon/reason anticipates the deluding effect of the moon-like light in "The Triumph."[10] Shelley even hints in *Epipsychidion* of the particular danger fully realized in "The Triumph" when he admonishes the moon to respect its proper function by "not eclipsing a remoter light" (363). Shelley's concern that the respective functions of the mind's faculties not be confused or disrupted is further evidenced by the relationship between imagination and reason asserted in the opening of the *Defence:* "reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent; as the body to the spirit; as the shadow to the substance" (*Prose,* p. 277). That relationship is analogous to the one between the moon and sun. In its function, reason should be imbued and illuminated by imagination, for without imagination as its controlling agent, reason tends to become tyrannic, imposing a cold and loveless mode of perception on the mind.

[9]*The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1964), 2:273. Hereafter cited in the text as *Letters.*

[10]For an explication of the sun/moon symbolism in *Epipsychidion,* see Carlos Baker, *Shelley's Major Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1948), pp. 233-37.

Despite the harmony revealed under the aegis of the newly risen sun that opens "The Triumph," the speaker's position and attitude sound the first discordant note in the poem and represent his potential rejection of imagination:

> But I, whom thoughts which must remain untold
>
> Had kept as wakeful as the stars that gem
> The cone of night, now they were laid asleep,
> Stretched my faint limbs beneath the hoary stem
>
> Which an old chestnut flung athwart the steep
> Of a green Apennine: before me fled
> The night; behind me rose the day; the Deep
>
> Was at my feet, & Heaven above my head.
>
> (21-28)

As David Quint notes, "the isolated speaker is . . . out of phase with the natural order, unable to partake in its refreshing sleep or morning ritual."[11] The speaker's attitude emphasizes a fundamental point in Shelley's concept of man: his free will, termed as early as *Queen Mab* "all-subduing will" (V.133). While all of nature rises to participate in the new day, the speaker does the opposite; he consciously isolates himself from the surrounding harmony, and that act, what Shelley calls "continued communion with *self*" (*Letters* 1:78), reflects a dangerous tendency of will toward selfhood. Because of his resolve, the speaker places himself in a precariously egocentric posture, signified by his physical position: "before me fled / The night; behind me rose the day; the Deep / Was at my feet, & Heaven above my head." The passage describes a quaternary with the speaker at its center. Choosing to face the fleeing night rather than the approaching day, he has allied himself with darkness rather than light, although at the moment he is merely suspended between the two. Because his back is turned to the sun, the speaker interposes himself before the sun's light, causing his own shadow to be projected on the scene before him, further emphasizing his preoccupation with self.

The speaker's suspended state indicates his commitment of will is not irreversible, for it is accompanied by a sense of stasis over which the sun still presides, even though it is at his back. In that suspended state a "strange trance" comes over the speaker which "was not slumber" (29-30). Here is the onset of the visionary moment, much like Wordsworth's "serene and blessed mood" in "Tintern Abbey" when

[11]Quint, p. 647.

the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

(41-49)

Although Shelley's speaker has chosen not to participate in the harmony of morning, he is nevertheless affected by it, for under the aegis of the sun the trance comes over him. As in Wordsworth, the visionary moment is depicted as involuntary; it comes unbidden.[12]

Within the trance, the scene shifts from dawn to a type of dusk, indicated by the similes in lines 32-33, 46, and 75-76. Instead of a fleeing night, the entranced speaker confronts an approaching one against which the sun's light is fading. The trance thus mirrors his orientation outside, fulfilling his desire for darkness rather than light.

Even though the trance embodies a type of night, the scene is dominated by a light that is the antithesis of the sun:

And a cold glare, intenser than the noon
But icy cold, obscured with [ ] light
The Sun as he the stars. Like the young moon

When on the sunlit limits of the night
Her white shell trembles amid crimson air
And whilst the sleeping tempest gathers might

Doth, as a herald of its coming, bear
The ghost of its dead Mother, whose dim form
Bends in dark ether from her infant's chair,

So came a chariot on the silent storm
Of its own rushing splendour.

(77-87)

In contrast to the sun's warm, vitalizing light, the chariot's light is "icy cold"—its "cold glare" so powerful it is "intenser than the noon." Like

[12]Shelley himself recognized the involuntary nature of the visionary moment. In the *Defence* he writes that "poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will . . . this power arises from within . . . and the conscious portions of our nature are unprophetic of its approach or its departure" (*Prose*, p. 294). Of course, the matter becomes conscious or voluntary when the individual chooses to act upon the visionary moment by composing or affirming its validity in some way.

the "Planet without a beam" in the Bixby-Huntington fragment, the chariot's light effectively eclipses the sun. The striking moon-simile, recalling Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" (10-14), suggests the chariot's light is analogous to the moon's. Shelley's association of the moon with reason in the Ollier letter, emphasizing its cold, borrowed, and uncertain qualities, makes plausible association of the chariot's light with reason, its deluding effect already anticipated in *Epipsychidion.* Because the "cold glare" is "intenser than the noon," it has usurped imagination's function and imposed its own harsh light in its stead. Although the image of the "dead Mother" literally corresponds to the shrouded figure of Life riding in the chariot, it also implies in the moon/reason context that a new type of reason is emerging, one discarding its proper dependence on imagination and assuming power of its own.

Emergence of a powerfully independent reason overshadowing imagination bodes disastrous consequences for the mind's perception of reality because it constitutes a disordered relationship between the mind's faculties. That disorder is signaled in "The Triumph" by an unnatural phenomenon in the progression stated in lines 77-79. Bloom attaches great significance to the progression: "The light of nature destroys the inner light of the poet, only to be obliterated in turn by the real light of everyday life."[13] Identification of the stars with the poet's inner light rests on the authority of *Adonais,* for there Shelley associates Keats with a star that "Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are" (495). Bloom seems to forget the sun is also a star, one more immediate to us than the others. When our own sun is withdrawn, the stars serve as remote beacons, offering hope of illumination to those under the influence of darkness just as the stars that "gem / The cone of night" had kept the speaker "wakeful" during the night and thus open to the vision that comes over him when the sun's light returns. Just as important, the sun's obscuring of the stars is a natural phenomenon. Because of its more immediate proximity, the sun naturally subsumes all other celestial lights in its own light. However, obscuring of the sun by the "cold glare" is not natural, for it would be a strange phenomenon indeed for the moon or any analogous light to be "intenser than the noon." Thus, the natural inevitability Bloom reads into the progression is not natural at all but a violation of the proper relationship between the lights leading to a distorting and ultimately blinding perception of things.

The distorting influence of the "cold glare" is evidenced by the Shape of Life riding in the chariot. Shrouded "beneath a dusky hood & double

[13]Bloom, p. 231.

cape" (89), the Shape reflects life seen only in its veiled or phenomenal aspect, its beauty, as Shelley observes in the *Defence,* "annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration" (*Prose,* p. 295). Such a view is essentially empirical and thus limited. Because it does not take into account what lies beneath the phenomenal veil, it is a partial vision of life, becoming distorted and false if accepted as the totality. But even this somber visualization of life is relieved by the description of the Shape's head:

> And o'er what seemed the head, a cloud like crape,
>
> Was bent a dun & faint etherial gloom
> Tempering the light.
>
> (91-93)

The "etherial" quality of the "gloom / Tempering" even the chariot's "cold glare" is suggestive of a spiritual aura connected with the Shape. In several ways, the image recalls Demogorgon in *Prometheus Unbound.* He too is depicted as a "shape" who appears as a "veiled form . . . a mighty darkness" from which "rays of gloom / Dart round, as light from the meridian sun" (II.iv.1-3). If Demogorgon represents, as some have suggested, the ultimate, seemingly unfathomable reality, "the deep truth" that is "imageless" (II.iv.116), Shelley's depiction nevertheless implies that the "mighty darkness" may well be a great source of light eclipsed by its veiled form.[14] For the simile "as light from the meridian sun" to have validity, it must in some way convey an attempt to conceptualize something that by its very nature defies conceptualizing. The meridian sun is, of course, the noon-sun, when the rays should be most intense, dispelling all shadows or vestiges of darkness. When such a sun is eclipsed, the solar disc appears as a darkened circle with rays around the edge giving off a faint, eerie light, inducing rather than dispelling shadows. Later in *Prometheus* another simile explicitly uses the eclipse to conceptualize Demogorgon's final appearance in the poem:

[14]See particularly C.E. Pulos, *The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1962). Pulos argues that, like Hume, Shelley believed reality is ultimately unknowable. I disagree with Pulos's basic thesis that skepticism forms "the logical center" of Shelley's thought (Preface). If that were true of the young Shelley, it certainly was not true of the mature Shelley. After 1819 his epistemology is closer to Coleridge than Hume. A major problem with Pulos's thesis is his failure to credit the emerging importance Shelley attached to imagination as a rational alternative to reason's demand for skepticism. Pulos implies that for Shelley imagination is a "nonrational source of provisional assent" (p. 77). He contrasts Shelley with Wordsworth and

> A mighty Power, which is as darkness
> Is rising out of Earth, and from the sky
> Is showered like night, and from within the air
> Bursts, like eclipse which has been gathered up
> Into the pores of sunlight.
>
> (IV. 510-14)

Whatever may be the possibilities of suggestion in *Prometheus*—and we should remember that Demogorgon identifies himself as Eternity (III.i.52), later depicted in *Adonais* as "white radiance" which the veil of life, "like a dome of many-coloured glass, / Stains . . . Until Death tramples it to fragments" (452-64)—there is certainly a suggestion in "The Triumph" that the veiled Shape of Life may itself be a mighty source of light eclipsed by its "dusky hood & double cape." Faced with that image, one may ponder whether beneath its outer covering the Shape hides within itself the "white radiance" which conditions of phenomenal existence obscure until death or the light of imagination parts the veil, revealing the "rays of gloom" transformed into warm brilliance like that embodied in Asia when she appears before Prometheus after his regeneration. In any case, the "faint etherial gloom" suggests a partially hidden, unfathomed aspect of the Shape of Life, mitigating its otherwise sinister appearance.

The limiting vision imposed by the chariot's harsh light is further evidenced by the blinded condition of the "Janus-visaged Shadow" (94) who serves as charioteer. The chariot's light—"beams that quench the Sun" (102)—does not represent clarification but rather unnatural distortion of vision leading eventually to blindness, a point signified by the "banded" eyes of the charioteer—eyes that otherwise "could pierce the sphere / Of all that is, has been, or will be done" (103-104). Even though his eyes are banded as protection against the unnatural light, they are rendered blind nonetheless, making the charioteer inept at guiding the chariot.

Although often identified as Destiny or Necessity, based primarily on a reference in *Hellas* to Destiny as "the world's eyeless charioteer" (711), the charioteer in "The Triumph" is, as A.C. Bradley noted, "far from eyeless, though his eyes are banded."[15] Thus, identifying him as an *in-*

Coleridge, asserting that "never accepting . . . the distinction between a lower and a higher rational faculty, Shelley avoids such confounding of imagination with reason" (p. 77). Pulos's claim loses validity in light of the *Defence*, an essay Pulos ignores in his study, for there Shelley states unequivocally that imagination is "the basis of all knowledge" (*Prose*, p. 293).

[15]"Notes on Shelley's 'Triumph of Life,'" *MLR* 9 (October 1914):447. Nevertheless Bradley was the first to identify the charioteer as Destiny or Necessity, an identification accepted more recently by Reiman, p. 31, and Cameron, p. 454.

herently blind force, such as Destiny or Necessity, is questionable. Perhaps a more helpful clue to his identity is his "Janus-visaged" head with its "four faces" (99). Shelley used the figure of Janus in the *Defence* as a symbol of the ambiguous nature of religion.[16] He may have the same idea in mind here. Discussing the various analogues for Shelley's chariot, Bloom argues not for similarities but for deliberate contrasts, concluding that "the triumphal procession of Life is a mockery, a diabolic *parody* of the triumphal processions of Ezekiel's Enthroned Man, Dante's Church, Revelation's and Milton's Christ."[17] Here I think Bloom is quite right; the procession is a parody of what ought to be. In that context, the "Janus-visaged" charioteer is a parody of religion itself, his four faces suggesting the four cardinal virtues of pagan religions or the four Gospels of Christianity. Whether pagan or Christian, religion in its uncorrupted form should, in Shelley's view, serve as an ethical philosophy, providing clear-sighted guidance to life; it should be imbued with imagination. Speaking of the true moral philosophers in the *Defence,* Shelley states that Plato taught "a moral and intellectual system of doctrine, comprehending at once the past, the present, and the future condition of man. Jesus Christ divulged the sacred and eternal truths contained in these views to mankind, and Christianity in its abstract purity became the exoteric expression of the esoteric doctrines of the poetry and wisdom of antiquity" (*Prose,* p. 288). Uncorrupted, religion should provide a guiding vision capable, like the eyes of the charioteer, of piercing "the sphere / Of all that is, has been, or will be done." But, as Shelley points out in the *Defence,* the purity of religion has been corrupted by "the extinction of the poetical principle connected with the progress of despotism and superstition" (*Prose,* p. 288). Shelley believed corruption was particularly evident in the institutional Church which had distorted the doctrines of Christ and effectively extinguished their "vivid poetry" (*Prose,* p. 288). Where the teachings of Christ urged selflessness, the despotic and superstitious distortions imposed by the Church fostered selfishness. As such, religion became a parody or "shadow" of what it should have been, blinded by "beams that quench the Sun" rather than illuminated by imagination. Thus the charioteer represents religion robbed of its "poetical principle," blindly guiding life under the influence of that eclipsing light which promotes selfhood in its wake. Without imagination, religion or any system of thought degenerates into what Quint terms ideology, defined as "any

[16]Shelley writes that "all original religions are allegorical, or susceptible of allegory, and like Janus have a double face of false and true" (*Prose,* p. 279).

[17]Bloom, p. 244.

representational shadow exalted into a god, into an absolute authority that exerts its tyranny over the mind and imagination." But I disagree when Quint attributes that degeneration to some "latent negativity of the imagination which will turn upon itself and invite its own destruction."[18] As Shelley makes quite clear in the *Defence,* the fault lies not in imagination *per se* but in its absence caused by the preponderance of reason which distorts and corrupts what was given initially by imagination.

The charioteer's inept guidance influences the actions of the people in the procession surrounding the chariot. Contrasting with the harmony outside the trance, the procession is characterized by frenetic and random motion, exemplifying "the fretful stir / Unprofitable, and the fever of the world" from Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" (52-53). Describing the motions of the participants, Shelley actually echoes "Tintern Abbey"—"like a man / Flying from what he dreads" (70-71)—when he writes of "Some flying from the thing they feared" (54). All the participants are human; like the speaker, they were free by virtue of their will to refuse participation in any harmonious activity, and their actions confirm their refusal. As the speaker observes, "none seemed to know / Whither he went, or whence he came, or why / He made one of the multitude" (47-49). The people are so caught up in narrow self-interest, pursuing "motions which each other crost" (62), they are oblivious to any sense of purpose or meaning beyond self. They have all chosen to foresake the sunlight and limit their vision to the "cone of night." The young in the van of the procession exhibit a narrowing and distorted vision through the unalloyed sensuality dominating their actions. Their "wild dance," described in lines 137-54, is a frenzied sexuality devoid of that love which alone gives legitimacy to the sexual act in Shelley's thinking. Their commitment to the "cold glare" means eventual enslavement to the light that "dims the Sun" (148). Those in the rear of the procession have grown old in selfhood. They have already been betrayed by the "cold glare," for now their vision verges on extinction as they fall "deeper in the shade" (169) and find themselves engulfed by "ghastly shadows" (171).

The most important group in the procession are those actually chained to the chariot: "The Wise, / The great, the unforgotten: they who wore / Mitres & helms & crowns, or wreathes of light, / Signs of thought's empire over thought" (208-11). Supposedly the enlightened leaders of men, the enchained are the most blinded because they have deluded themselves into believing that the light to which they are enslaved reveals truth. As Rousseau later tells the speaker, they have

[18]Quint, p. 650.

sought to impose and perpetuate their error "Till that eclipse still hanging under Heaven / Was worshipped by the world o'er which they strode / For the true Sun it quenched" (290–92). The "signs of thought's empire over thought" worn by the enchained reflect the usurped and eclipsing empire of reason over imagination, or in Quint's terms the degeneration of imaginative vision into ideology. Such an empire is built on an illusion willed by its subjects: "And for the morn of truth they feigned, deep night / Caught them ere evening" (214–15). As in lines 77–79, Shelley here uses an unnatural phenomenon to emphasize his point. Those who feign "the morn of truth," who pretend to possess the light of the sun, actually plunge themselves into the darkness of "deep night," but it is not a natural or expected darkness because it comes "ere evening." The pretense of truth betrays the pretenders to an engulfing darkness of mind that is not only unnatural but unexpected.

If the multitude in the procession conveys a pessimistic picture of man's intellectual enslavement, those missing from the throng are proof that what is depicted is not an inevitable aspect of the human condition. In contrast to those caught up in the procession, the "sacred few"—followers of the example set by Socrates of Athens and Christ of Jerusalem—"who could not tame / Their spirits to the Conqueror" (128–29) have directed their will in accord with the "living flame" (130), their inner impulse to love which motivates imaginative vision. Consequently, they possess a clarity of vision allowing them to see through the show of material life, escape its allure, and return "like eagles to their native noon" (131). In so doing, the "sacred few" become like the "pure spirit" in *Adonais* of whom Shelley affirms: it "shall flow / Back to the burning fountain whence it came, / A portion of the eternal, which must glow / Through time and change, unquenchably the same" (338–41). But total withdrawal from physical life is not the only alternative; there are those missing from the procession who continued in the world but nevertheless escaped enslavement. They "put aside the diadem / Of earthly thrones or gems" (132–33), that is, they rejected the limited concept of knowledge, power, and spirituality spawned by commitment to narrow self-interest. Consequently, they have not been betrayed by the "cold glare" but are still guided by the sun.

Those missing from the procession have not allowed themselves to fall victim to the "mutiny within" (213) afflicting those enslaved. The nature of that mutiny is clarified when the speaker observes "how power & will / In opposition rule our mortal clay" (228–29). Because he bears within the "living flame" which mirrors the "burning fountain" of divine love at the hidden center of reality, man possesses the power to love. But he also possesses a will free to deny that capacity, for as Shelley affirms in *Julian and Maddalo,* "it is our will / That thus enchains us to permitted ill— / We might be otherwise—we might be all / We dream of happy,

high, majestical" (170-73). Those in the procession have willed to oppose the impulse of their own "living flame," and they suffer the consequences. In contrast, the "sacred few" have harmonized rather than opposed their will and power to love. They have willed to follow the light of imagination and to love in the highest sense, without regard to self. Their example is the key by which man can liberate himself from the darkness of self-imposed intellectual slavery.

That the speaker begins to question (lines 176-79) what he sees indicates that his own self-limited perspective before the trance is not irreversible. His questions are auspicious because they express willingness to be enlightened. His use of the word "amiss" (179) to characterize what he sees reflects recognition that it should all be different. From his perspective as a still passive observer rather than active participant, he has a detached perception of the insidious consequences following rejection of imagination's light, yet he seems not to recognize the cause; he still asks why all is "amiss." Although a dramatic necessity demanded by the poem's next movement, the speaker's question here is somewhat curious. Because he himself explained the absence of the "sacred few" in lines 128-37, he should already know why all is "amiss." Of course, that would undermine the necessity of introducing Rousseau whose function is to explain the procession in terms of his own experience as a participant. Thus, it seems placement of the "sacred few" passage before Rousseau assumes the narrative is a structural flaw giving the speaker too much insight too soon, a flaw Shelley might have corrected had he completed "The Triumph." Nevertheless, the speaker's questions are a hopeful sign that he is on the verge of recognizing the full implication of his own misdirection of will evidenced before the onset of the trance.

II

To provide the answer to the speaker's questions, Shelley introduces the figure of "what was once Rousseau" (204). Depicted as "one of the deluded crew" (184) who followed the sinister chariot, the figure is so deformed the speaker first thought it "an old root which grew / To strange distortion out of the hill side" (182-83). The figure's most significant features are "the holes it vainly sought to hide" which "Were or had been eyes" (187-88). As he identifies himself, Rousseau reveals the reason for his blindness:

> "Before thy memory
>
> "I feared, loved, hated, suffered, did, & died
> And if the spark with which Heaven lit my spirit
> Earth had with purer nutriment supplied

"Corruption would not now thus much inherit
Of what was once Rousseau."

(199-204)

The series of past tense verbs ending with "died" in line 200 is significant in understanding the later portion of Rousseau's narrative. He has already experienced physical death; his spirit is speaking here from the grave, from what will emerge to be a postmortem purgatorial state, through the shape symbolic of what he became before his death. His grotesque, eyeless appearance reflects spiritual corruption, the denial of imagination suffered during life. Although he at first blames his corruption on his physical nature, suggesting corruption was inevitable, a few lines later he acknowledges his own willful responsibility: "'I was overcome / By my own heart alone, which neither age / Nor tears nor infamy nor now the tomb / Could temper to its object'" (240-43).[19] But in this, as Quint rightly observes, Rousseau "is an exemplary rather than an exceptional figure."[20] His is the fate of all who foresake the light of imagination for a false, deluding and loveless light. Because he allowed himself to become one of "the deluded crew," Rousseau's vision became so thoroughly impaired by the "cold glare" that he lost in life the capacity to love selflessly, to imagine in the highest sense. Such a Rousseau is incompatible with Reiman's contention that the figure depicted here is an "idealized picture" of Rousseau "portrayed in terms of Saint-Preux," the hero in *Julie ou La Nouvelle Heloise.*[21] Cameron's suggestion that Shelley had in mind Rousseau as he portrayed himself in *Reveries du Promeneur Solitaire,* completed just before his death in 1778, is more plausible.[22] The reflective attitude of *Reveries,* less bitter and more cognizant of self-failings than the earlier *Confessions,* supports Cameron's suggestion. Though Shelley depicts Rousseau as already dead, the attitudes reflected are akin to those Rousseau expressed in his second and last autobiographical work.

If we understand that Rousseau speaks from a postmortem state, then his account of how in life he came to be in the procession becomes clear in most of its details. Elicited by the speaker's questions, probably no part of the poem has been so variously interpreted as Rousseau's response. He begins with what at first appears to be the beginning of his life:

[19]The syntax of this passage is ambiguous. The phrase "nor now the tomb" could mean either (1) what is now left for death to possess or (2) what death already possesses. Because Rousseau refers to his death in the past tense in line 200, I accept the second reading as the intended sense of line 242.

[20]Quint, p. 650.

[21]Reiman, pp. 59-60.

[22]Cameron, p. 461.

"Now listen . . . In the April prime
When all the forest tops began to burn

"With kindling green, touched by the azure clime
Of the young year, I found myself asleep
Under a mountain which from unknown time

"Had yawned into a cavern high & deep."
(308-13)

The spring season invites association with birth, and most commentators read this passage in terms of line 59 of Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode"—"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting"—arguing that it represents either Rousseau's physical birth or his awakening to some stage of consciousness in this life.[23] Such readings seem questionable because they ignore the possibility that spring may be associated with *re*birth and, more importantly, they do not recognize the significance of the setting where Rousseau awakes.

He does not begin his narrative at the expected beginning, that is, with his birth into physical life or into any stage of awakened consciousness within life; rather, he begins with his death to this life, which in terms of Asia's account of the life-cycle of the human soul in *Prometheus Unbound* is the point of re-entry into what she calls the "diviner day":

We have passed Age's icy caves,
And Manhood's dark and tossing waves,
And Youth's smooth ocean, smiling to betray:
Beyond the glassy gulphs we flee
Of shadow-peopled Infancy
Through Death and Birth to a diviner day.
(II.v.98-103)

As the passage regresses from Age to Infancy, a reversal in the expected order takes place after Infancy. Where Birth would be expected, we get instead Death then Birth, suggesting that birth into physical life is death to the "diviner day," and conversely, death to physical life is birth, or more properly rebirth, into the "diviner day." Depending on one's perspective, Death and Birth become a point of interchange defining the soul's movement into and out of life.[24] The sleep or "oblivious spell" (332) referred to is Rousseau's death, the release of his soul from its

[23]See Baker, p. 265; Bloom, pp. 263-64; Reiman, p. 61; and Quint, p. 646.
[24]See also lines 201-10 of *Hellas*.

physical encasement; the awakening is his rebirth into the realm of the "diviner day," though he finds himself as yet only on the threshold, in the last stage of a type of Dantean purgatory.

Most readers assume Rousseau wakes inside the cavern running through the mountain on an east/west axis, but the phrase "I found myself asleep / Under a mountain which from unknown time / Had yawned high & deep" does not necessarily place him inside the cavern. "Under a mountain" may mean at its foot or base. That reading becomes more plausible when Rousseau continues his description of the scene and his movements:

> "I arose & for a space
> The scene of woods & waters seemed to keep,
>
> "Though it was now broad day, a gentle trace
> Of light diviner than the common Sun
> Sheds on the common Earth."
>
> (335-39)

Nothing here supports the contention that Rousseau was sleeping inside the cavern, awoke there, and then emerged into the open forest.[25] On the contrary, he seems to say he awoke before the entrance to the cavern on the western side of the mountain. He rose, found himself in a forest at the mountain's base, and looked eastward toward the cavern where he saw that "the bright omnipresence / Of morning through the orient cavern flowed" (343-44). It should be noted that Rousseau's actions parallel in reverse those of the speaker at the beginning of the poem. Whereas the speaker lay down facing the west, Rousseau rises from sleep and faces east. The speaker's actions reflect a dying state, those of Rousseau a renewal or rebirth.

To identify the forest where Rousseau awakens with the one that opens Dante's *Inferno* and read it as a "standard symbol for life and the world" is incorrect.[26] This is no "gloomy wood" of sin or error into which Rousseau has strayed. (Such a forest does figure in his narrative, but it comes later, at lines 480-81.) This forest, with its "light diviner" and its "many sounds woven into one / Oblivious melody" (340-41), is called a "valley of perpetual dream" (397), a soothing but almost clichéd image of the realm of death. The presence in the forest of a stream whose sound is described as a "Lethean song" (462) suggests that Shelley had in mind,

[25]See Baker, pp. 265-66; Bloom, p. 265; Cameron, pp. 463-64; Reiman, pp. 60-61; and Rieger, p. 210. All assume that Rousseau either wakes in the cavern or somehow passed through it in his sleep.

[26]Cameron, p. 464.

as A.C. Bradley thought, a setting analogous to "la divina foresta" in cantos XXVIII-XXIX of Dante's *Purgatorio*.[27] In that forest the last memory of sin is purged by the waters of Lethe before the soul is allowed to enter Heaven. As Bradley noted, "the stream in Dante is Lethe, and in Shelley it sings a 'Lethean song.'"[28] That Shelley had Dante's divine forest in mind is confirmed if we consider the imagery used to describe his own stream's movement. Dante writes of Lethe that its "little waves went by, / Bending towards the left through grass that grew / Upon its bank" (*Purg.* XXVIII.26-28).[29] Shelley picks up the image of the stream bending the grass when he writes of his stream that "its calm sweep / Bent the soft grass & kept forever wet / The stems of the sweet flowers" (315-17). Just as Dante's Lethe induces forgetfulness of sin, Shelley's Lethean stream induces forgetfulness of individuating distinctions, upon which the Shelleyan sin of selfhood is predicated, for "all who hear must needs forget / All pleasure & all pain, all hate & love, / Which they had known before that hour of rest" (318-20), that is, before the hour of death.

Because in death the "painted veil" of phenomenal existence is totally lifted as the "pure spirit flows / Back to the burning fountain whence it came," Rousseau should be prepared to enter "the realm without a name" (396), the realm of complete vision effected through the perfect union with a Power whose "light diviner" can already be seen flowing through the "orient cavern." The light emanates from the sun, but the contrast of its light with what the "common Sun / Sheds on the common Earth" indicates that this sun must be distinguished from the one whose rise opened the poem. The latter is the "common Sun" which "in the world of human experiences," as Reiman says, "represents Imagination, the divine in man."[30] It is a sun bearing epistemological connotations. However, the sun in Rousseau's narrative transcends the "common Sun" and bears metaphysical connotations; it is not the imagination as the divine spark in man. Rather, it is the divine Power itself, indicated by the terms Rousseau uses to describe the source of the "light diviner"; they are precisely those used in *Adonais* to describe the unveiled metaphysical sun as the "white radiance of Eternity" and the "burning fountain":

[27]Bradley, pp. 442-43.

[28]Bradley, p. 443.

[29]These are from Shelley's own translation of the first fifty-one lines of canto XXVIII of the *Purgatorio* (see *Poetical Works*, pp. 727-28).

[30]Reiman, p. 15. See also Baker, pp. 233-36 and 251.

"And the Sun's image radiantly intense

"Burned on the waters of the well that glowed
Like gold, and threaded all the forest maze
With winding paths of emerald fire—there stood

"Amid the sun, as he amid the blaze
Of his own glory, on the vibrating
Floor of the fountain, paved with flashing rays,

"A shape all light."

(345-52)

Here Shelley brings together in a single passage a number of images previously used to conceptualize the underlying Power or source of being in the universe. In addition to suggestions of "white radiance" and the "burning fountain," there is the added image in the "floor of the fountain, paved with flashing rays" of the wheel with its fiery spokes, an image first used in *Queen Mab* (IX.151-57) to depict the outpouring of being from its center to a boundless circumference.

As evidence that Rousseau's spirit has awakened from the "oblivious spell" near the center or source of being but has yet to reach it, his description is not of a direct vision of the sun but an indirect one reflected on the water of the fountain, located inside the cavern as the source of the Lethean stream. To look on the sun directly, Rousseau would have to move through the "orient cavern." In other words, his movement would have to be from the west, suggestive of death, through the mountain-cavern, to the east, suggestive of rebirth into the "diviner day," a sequence of movements that does not take place in the poem as we have it. In this context, the cavern represents the point of interchange betwen physical life on the circumference of what Shelley calls "the circle of existing things" (*Prose,* p. 201) and existence at the center where the individual's spirit is enfolded in the "light diviner" radiating from the metaphysical sun, which is the only true center of reality.

The "shape all light," who appears amid the sun's reflected image, is the embodiment of the sun's diffused light which becomes divided into a rainbow-like spectrum of colors as it emanates from the sun's white radiance. The Shape imitates that phenomenon when "before her on the dusky grass / Iris her many coloured scarf had drawn" (356-57). Despite some assertions to the contrary, Baker is correct in identifying this "shape all light" with other *epipsyche* figures in Shelley's poetry.[31] In

[31]Baker, pp. 264-67. Rieger calls the Shape a "false Matilda" and a "Circe" (p. 211). Bloom sees her as "a diabolic parody of the Witch of Atlas or Dante's Matilda" (p. 267).

appearance and function, the Shape most closely resembles the Vision in *Epipsychidion* who, "Soft as an Incarnation of the Sun, / When light is changed to love," awakens the speaker from his "long night" (dominated by the light of the "cold chaste Moon") and penetrates his being with "living light" (335-42). Both the Vision of *Epipsychidion* and the "shape all light" function as types of Beatrice figures, symbolizing Divine Love or what Shelley calls "A divine presence in a place divine" (*Epipsychidion,* 135). In "The Triumph," the Shape represents the outpouring of being which, when seen by the beholding mind, reflects the source from which it proceeds.

Those who interpret the Shape's action as malevolent misread what actually takes place as she moves toward Rousseau:

> "And still her feet, no less than the sweet tune
> To which they moved, seemed as they moved, to blot
> The thoughts of him who gazed on them, & soon
>
> "All that was seemed as if it had been not,
> As if the gazer's mind was strewn beneath
> Her feet like embers, & she, thought by thought,
>
> "Trampled its fires into the dust of death,
> As day upon the threshold of the east
> Treads out the lamps of night, until the breath
>
> "Of darkness reillumines even the least
> Of heaven's living eyes—like the day she came
> Making the night a dream."
>
> (382-93)

Here is what should be the ultimate act of illumination, the final absorption of Rousseau's spirit into the light of the metaphysical sun, a last purging from his consciousness of any lingering memories of his physical life, already made faint by the "oblivious spell" that was his death. As

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And Quint argues that the Shape functions as a seductress, representing a "private ideology" (p. 650). The Matilda comparison is unsatisfactory even though the scene bears comparison with the *Purgatorio;* the radiance of the "shape all light" demands comparison with Dante's Beatrice who appears for the first time at the end of the *Purgatorio.* Quint's interpretation reveals what I think is a major flaw in his essay: the tendency to use "shape" and "shadow" as if they are interchangeable, both bearing negative connotations. Because of its inherent association with darkness, "shadow" does bear a negative connotation, and that carries over to "shape" when it is modified by "shadow" (e.g. the Shape of Life with its shadowy veil). But in itself, "shape" carries no inherently negative connotation. When modified by light, as in "shape all light," the word assumes the positive connotation Shelley associates with sunlight throughout the poem.

she approaches Rousseau, the Shape surrounds him with the radiance of the sun's light so that even the fires which had been the thoughts of his individual imagination are absorbed in the "light diviner," just as in life the imagination itself had sought through its light to absorb all things into a unity. Hence the Shape's actions parallel on a metaphysical level the actions of the imagination on an epistemological level, and both of these levels parallel the natural sun "as Day upon the threshold of the east / Treads out the lamps of night."

Before the process of absorption is completed, however, Rousseau asks the Shape the same questions the speaker had asked him at lines 296-97:

> "ere she ceased
>
> "To move, as one between desire and shame
> Suspended, I said—'If, as it doth seem,
> Thou comest from the realm without a name,
>
> "'Into this valley of perpetual dream,
> Shew whence I came, and where I am, and why—'" (393-98)

Like the speaker as he entered his trance, Rousseau describes himself in a state of suspension. His questions are evidence that the pernicious "mutiny within" still affects his spirit. Even in death he resists the loss of individual identity; he is still infected by what Shelley termed "*self*—that burr which sticks to one" (*Letters* II.108-109). In his suspended state, Rousseau hesitates to affirm the truth of what he sees; he uses the word "seems" repeatedly, thus reflecting his uncertainty. And, like the souls in Dante's "divine forest," Rousseau must be finally purged of the lingering "burr" of self before he can affirm and enter the "realm without a name."

In answer to his first request—"Shew whence I came"—the Shape offers Rousseau the cup of Nepenthe. His request seeks to look back across the grave from the threshold of the "realm without a name" to the life he has just quitted, to move not eastward through the "orient cavern," but westward, retracing the course of his life. The Nepenthe, which may be water from the Lethean stream, serves to answer his request, but it will simultaneously produce in the reluctant Rousseau the needed desire to forget what Cameron rightly interprets as "his egocentric self" by calling up before him "a new Vision never seen before" (411).[32] That "new Vision" is a form of the vision of Life that has been

[32]Cameron, p. 467. Cameron also reads the Shape's blotting out of thought not as

rolling across the entranced speaker's mind, a vision of the delusion engulfing those who allow themselves to become enslaved to a falsifying and egocentric light. In noting the difference in emphasis between the speaker's and Rousseau's descriptions of the vision, Cameron suggests the first is "the poet's vision of life in Shelley's day, in the aftermath of the defeat of the French Revolution, whereas Rousseau's vision is of life in the years before the Revolution."[33] More plausibly, the "new Vision" reflects Rousseau's newly attained perspective, gained only through his death, allowing him to see his life as he would not see it when he lived.

When Rousseau is commanded by the Shape to "Arise and quench thy thirst" (400), he is hurled back to the beginning of his life: "And as a shut lily, stricken by the wand / Of dewy morning's vital alchemy, / I rose" (401-403). At this point a westward movement begins, away from the "orient cavern." Like the child in Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode" who enters the world with recollections of a pre-existence which fade as he matures, Rousseau, transported back to his own birth through the Nepenthe, retains an initial awareness of the Shape. But as the light of the chariot approaches, the Shape begins to fade, like the morning-star:

> "And the fair shape waned in the coming light
> As veil by veil the silent splendour drops
> From Lucifer, amid chrysolite
>
> "Of sunrise, ere it strikes the mountain tops—
> And as the presence of that fairest planet
> Although unseen is felt by one who hopes
>
> "That his day's path may end as he began it,
> In that star's smile."
>
> (412-19)

The simile suggests that just as the planet Venus reappears at day's end in the form of the evening or folding-star, so too one may hope that the "fair shape" will reappear at life's end. The simile implicitly repeats the concept explicit in *Adonais* (338-42) that our life proceeds from and ends at the same point, a spiritual existence within the "light diviner."

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destruction but as symbolic of "rebirth, and rebirth to a finer existence" — an idea with which I agree. However, in Cameron's scheme this rebirth takes place immediately after what he takes to be Rousseau's birth into this world. If that is so, why is there an immediate rebirth to a "finer existence"? I see Rousseau's awakening and encounter with the Shape as part of a single process — the rebirth occasioned by his death to this life, which is the ultimate way to achieve a "finer existence" in what Rousseau calls the "realm without a name."

[33]Cameron, p. 470.

As the "new Vision" continues, Rousseau finds himself plunging into "the clime / Of that cold light, whose airs too soon deform" (467-68); he becomes a victim of delusion, for like the others in the throng he too forsakes the true Sun's light for the false sun that betrays its followers to darkness, symbolizing the eclipse of imagination and loss of the capacity to love, to negate self-assertion or egotism: "For deaf as is a sea which wrath makes hoary / The world can hear not the sweet notes that move / The sphere whose light is melody to lovers" (477-79). The lost capacity to love selflessly, to imagine, leads to corruption and spiritual death, described by Rousseau in lines 480-543. This section of the narrative, prefaced by a comparison with Dante's *La Divina Commedia* (471-80), marks Rousseau's experience of the equivalent of Dante's dark wood of error in the *Inferno* as Rousseau observes "the grove / Grew dense with shadows to its inmost covers" (480-81). The picture presented in the subsequent lines recalls Shelley's statement in the Preface to *Alastor:* "Those who love not their fellow-beings live unfruitful lives, and prepare for their old age a miserable grave" (*Prose,* p. 315). Having himself run the course, Rousseau brings his narrative full circle when he tells the speaker "I have fallen by the wayside" (541), symbolic of the death which was his final release from the "deluded crew."

Rousseau's narrative stands as an object lesson to the speaker. As indicated by the eyeless shape of "what was once Rousseau," commitment to a loveless perception of life dominated by the cold light of reason alone ultimately eclipses man's inner "living flame" and destroys his visionary capacity. For Rousseau, only death has revived the divine spark. However, for the speaker, it is not too late; he is still suspended between night and day outside the trance. Had Shelley lived to complete "The Triumph," he would no doubt have provided a closing frame ending the speaker's trance. I find it difficult to believe the speaker's attitude would remain unchanged, that he would continue to face night and reject participation in the harmony ruled over by the sun. Through the example of Rousseau, he has seen what is in store for himself if he continues to oppose his will against the impulse awakened by the sun. Either he redirects his will in accord with that impulse and joins the rejoicing of an "awakened Earth," or he risks becoming himself one of the "deluded crew," seeing life through what Shelley calls in the *Defence* "an excess of the selfish and calculating principle" which attempts "to exalt over the direct expression of the inventive and creative faculty" of imagination (*Prose,* p. 293). The latter is nothing more than an affirmation of self leading to spiritual and intellectual darkness, but the former is a spiritually awakened perception of life illuminated by what Baker calls "a kind of religious imagination."[34]

[34]Baker, p. 238.